Ching Ching's Novelettes.

No. 1.—*Presented gratis with "Ching Ching's Own."*

SNAPSON OF THE "SNAKE."

A Sea Story. By the Author of "For Honour."

CHAPTER I.

THE OLD INN AT WAPPING—AN ARRANGEMENT FOR EVIL WORK—WILL AND THE MASTER OF THE "SNAKE."

IN a public-house in Wapping, frequented by the lower seafaring class, sat two men drinking and smoking and talking in whispers.

One was a man about forty, or it might be forty-five, for he was one of those men who get into middle life when they are

quite young, and keep there until absolute old age is upon them.

He was dressed like the master of a small trading brig, in a rough pilot suit, and his cap, with its dingy band of BRASS lace, lay on the table beside him.

The other man was his opposite in appearance as well as dress.

He was a slim wiry old man, attired in a suit such as farmers wear when away from home, but which did not seem to belong to him.

It was, in fact, assumed as a disguise, and when he spoke his voice showed he had very little to do with the plough and harrow.

"Now, Snapson," he said, as he poured some water into a glass containing spirits before him, "you know exactly what to do. The boy will be here presently and you must be all honey to him. Get him on board, and after that—YOU KNOW."

"It's a risky job," said Snapson, "especially if it comes to sinking the brig."

"But well paid for."

"What's the good of pay to a man at the bottom of the sea? Mr. Warrington——"

"Have the goodness not to speak my name here."

"Very well, sir. Now, say that I sink the brig fifty miles from land, and we take to the boats, and then up whistles a storm——"

"That will do," said the old man, rising, "I see you can't face the business. I will leave it for the present and stop the boy coming."

"Don't do that," interposed Snapson hastily, "all right, Mr. War—— sir, I'll do it."

"Five hundred pounds the moment you come back with the news that the boy is dead. Only there must be no mistake about it."

"All right, sir."

The old man emptied his glass, rose up, buttoned his coat close, and, pulling a broad-brimmed hat he wore down over his eyes, left the room without another word.

After he was gone Snapson sat awhile in deep meditation.

He had not a pleasant face at any time. A blind man would soon find out that he was no beauty, and just then it was at its worst.

His brows were knitted, his lips compressed, and there was a very ugly gleam in his eye.

"By George!" he said, smiting the table suddenly, "I'll do it and take what comes of the job; and I'll do it in a way that will astonish somebody."

He finished his grog and rang the bell to order some more.

His summons was responded to by an ill-favoured woman, who, without waiting to hear what he wanted, said in a snappish way—

"There's a man and boy in the bar who wants to see you."

"Send 'em in," said Snapson, "and bring me another go of rum."

In a few moments a man, who had the appearance of a broken-down gentleman's servant, entered the room, bringing with him a lad of twelve, ill-clad, and looking as if he had been half-starved.

His clothes were in tatters, and his face pinched, but there was still some fire in his eyes, and he looked at Snapson fearlessly.

"Here's your boy," said the man with him, "and that's the end of my job unless you are going to stand a drink."

"Which I am not," replied Snapson, curtly, "and you can go as soon as you like."

The man grunted out something not particularly complimentary, and left the room.

Snapson beckoned to the boy.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Will Fearon," was the reply.

"Father alive?"

"No; nor mother either."

The boy answered these questions quietly and without moving his eyes from Snapson's face. His close scrutiny made the man uneasy.

"I suppose you know I'm going to take you to sea with me?" he said, after a pause.

"I was told that I had to go to sea," Will replied.

"Who told you so?"

"My grandfather, Mr. Warrington."

"Ah! he is a nice kind man, isn't he?"

"I don't think so," said the boy, "he was cruel to my mother, and then he hated my father, and he has never done anything for me but keep me as I am."

The boy held up his arms to show his rags with a proud defiant look, and went on—

"But people tell me that there is money to come to me when I am a man, and then I shall want for nothing. But if I die ——"

The boy stopped, and Snapson, looking at him sideways, said—

"Well, my lad, if you die——"

"If I die before I am a man the money will go to my grandfather," Will replied.

"I suppose you don't know how much it is?" said Snapson, with a sly look.

"No, I don't," Will returned, "but I believe it is a lot; quite a fortune."

"That sounds well," said Snapson, rubbing his hands; "now you be a good boy and I'll take care of you until you are a man, and then we will have jolly times of it together. Will you have anything to drink?"

The boy hesitated for a moment as if loth to partake of his hospitality.

"I should like some milk or gingerbeer," he said.

"Anything you like," said Snapson, cheerily, "and bread and cheese, or cold meat if they've got it. Lor'! what times we'll have of it now aboard the 'Snake,' won't we? and when you are a man——Dashed if it don't bring tears into my eyes to think of the kick-ups we will have. You come with me and make no fuss. I—Job Snapson—master of the brig 'Snake,' owned by Warrington and Co., am your friend. Just keep that in mind!"

CHAPTER II.

DOWN THE CHANNEL AND OUT TO SEA—A CHANGE OF WIND AND A CHANGE IN THE MANNER OF SNAPSON.

THE "Snake" sailed the next day for the Mauritius with a mixed cargo and rather a mixed crew.

They had been picked up by Job Snapson in the low lodging-houses, and no two of the men had the title to call themselves old acquaintances.

Snapson appointed two of them to act under him, mainly on account of their Herculean forms. They were just the sort of men to put a stop to any nonsense among the men.

"First the blow," he said, "then argue with 'em. If they yarn too much give 'em another knock, and let it be harder than the first."

With these simple instructions, the two men, Dopper and Grip by name, took the positions of under-officers.

Job Snapson had a cabin to himself of course, and he let it be known that nobody was to come into that cabin without special permission unless they were anxious to be sent out again in a hurry.

Will Fearon was, however, to be made an exception.

"I've took the lad as an apprentice," he said, "but he's a weakly chap and will want some looking after, so he has a bunk in my den."

This sounded nice and kind, but the men were not much impressed, nor did they trouble their minds about the matter.

Dopper and Grip, however, formed their own opinion on the subject, which they confided to each other before the "Snake" was out of sight of the Nore.

"There's some game up with that boy," said Dopper, as they walked to and fro on the deck.

Snapson was below, having dinner with Will, whom he was treating with a kindness that amounted to coddling.

"I guess what it is," replied Grip, "he's been paid to get rid of that boy, and if so——"

"You think you will stop him?"

"Not me! I shall look for my share of the tin," replied Grip.

"You are a man," whispered Dopper, grasping his hand; "and remember this—we work together and go snacks in what's to be got out of it. When you can't keep your eye on Snapson, I will; and he shall do what he likes with the boy so long as we can BRING IT HOME TO HIM if we want to."

Poor Will! he was now surrounded with villainy, and very little hope or chance of his escaping was visible.

But he seemed to have no idea of anything wrong existing.

All down the Channel, and the brig went slowly before an easy wind, he had nothing to do but to eat and drink and sleep, or listen to the instruction given him by Job Snapson, who told him all about the names of the ropes, spars, blocks, and so on.

"I give all my apprentices a good groundwork," said Snapson to Dopper.

Dopper blinked his eyes and muttered to himself—

"Underground work to some of 'em, I reckon."

At last the Channel was cleared, and the "Snake" got into the wide Atlantic.

Then the wind freshened, and, blowing from the north-east, sent the ship along at a fair pace.

She was rather a heavy craft, and very old, a fact no coat of new paint could hide from an experienced eye.

All the sailors by this time had learnt that she was an old tub that would hardly stand anything like a storm.

"She's brought out to be sunk," they said, "and her mixed cargo's well insured, you bet."

But that was no concern of theirs, as they well knew the risks of their calling, and took everything as it came.

With the increase in the breeze there came a change over Job Snapson.

The east wind did not seem to agree with him any more than it agrees with people generally.

He became curt in his manner to everybody, swore frightfully on the least provocation, and when the men were not quite quick enough for him, it was the blow first and the word afterwards, according to his teaching.

And to Will the change was particularly apparent.

The sea voyage so far had done him good, but he was still pale, and had the delicate look that marked him from the first.

At that time there were no signs in him of the stamina necessary for the making him a sailor.

But Job Snapson was not going to take that into account.

"He's got to work, that boy," he said. "Here! come up, you little beggar, and do something."

The old brig was rolling in a heavy sea, and Will came up the companion looking a little scared.

All night long it had been blowing pretty hard, and it might now be called half-a-gale.

"Now, then," roared Snapson, "no skulking; come and do some work. Go aloft and take your turn at the lookout business."

The boy had never been aloft. No reference to his going had been made before, and he raised his eyes with natural affright to the tapering spars and creaking ropes.

"I don't think I dare go there, sir," he said.

"Up you go," said Snapson, furiously; "orders are given here to be obeyed. Now then."

The boy fell upon his knees and raised his clasped hands.

"Don't drive me up there," he cried, "give me work, hard work, to do below on deck, and I will do it; but up there I cannot go."

"This is mutiny," said Snapson savagely, drawing a revolver from his pocket, "and I've got the law to allow me to make an end of you if you don't obey. Do you hear? up, or I'll blow your head off."

The boy looked at the mouth of the revolver-barrel, shuddered, and got upon his feet.

"I'll go as far as I can," he said, slowly, "and if I am killed, why then I hope somebody here will avenge me."

He looked at Dopper and Grip, who were standing near, and there was no pity in their eyes.

From them he looked to the sailors of the watch, and they only stared back at him indifferently.

What was it to them?

All their lives they had known nothing but rough treatment. They had

been licked into shape long ago, and they did not see why Will should not be in his turn served the same way.

"Up! up!" cried Snapson, "I'll have you go aloft by day and night too, or I'll know the reason why. Now, smart."

Will braced himself up, drew himself into the ratlines, and slowly began the ascent.

All on deck watched him closely, Snapson particularly so.

The boy went up slowly, the way being new to him, but he kept a tight grip on the rope, and did not look down. So he went about two-thirds of the height of the mast, and then Snapson called on him to stop.

"That will do," he said, "you can come down now."

Will came back with the slow hesitating step of inexperience, and alighted on the deck, looking very pale.

"You see you've got to do it," said Snapson, "both day and night, or you will never make a sailor."

"It's the night work he's got his mind on," said Dopper to Grip.

"And it will be at night when the job's done," Grip replied.

CHAPTER III

WILL DEFIES SNAPSON TO DO HIS WORST—HE APPEALS TO DOPPER AND GRIP THEN TO THE MEN, AND FINDS NO FRIENDS.

WILL turned to Snapson with a strange look in his eyes that rather puzzled Dopper, and said—

"I suppose you mean to kill me? Why not do it now? You have the weapon ready for use."

He pointed to the jacket pocket of Snapson, which was bulky with the revolver he kept there. Snapson laughed in a cold hard way.

"Not such a fool as to do anything that way!" he said.

"It would be more manly," exclaimed Will.

"But what's put it into your head that I mean to make an end of you?" demanded Snapson.

Will smiled in a quiet way.

"You ought to know whether I am right or wrong," he said. "My life has not lately been so happy that I need fear death."

It was a strange remark to come from a boy, little more than a child, and it seemed to strike the listeners around.

They looked at each other as if surprised, but there were no signs of real sympathy for the truly lonely boy.

Snapson looked keenly around at the men who were near, as if to read what their thoughts on the matter might be.

What he saw, or fancied he saw, gave him renewed bullying power.

"Boys who come to sea," he said, "have got to take the rough with the smooth. I've fed you well, I sleep you in my own cabin; and I should like to know if any man aboard here ever heard of such a thing before?"

"Blessed if I did," said Dopper.

"Nor me, either," added Grip.

"No, nor any living man before," said Snapson, with a savage stare at Will; "and this is how I am rewarded. Cheeked! that's what I've been, and no man that's master of his own vessel can stand that."

He drew up to Will and shook his fist in the boy's face.

"You've got to do just what you are told here," he said, "d'ye hear?"

"I hear," replied Will, "and what I can do, I will do, and try to do no more."

"This is rank mutiny," said Snapson, seizing him by the collar; "come down below and I'll talk to you."

"I won't go," said Will, struggling; "if you are going to beat me, do it here. Do it before men who can see the coward's work."

"I've a good mind to chuck you overboard," growled Snapson, "and so have done with you."

He did drag him a little way, but suddenly he cast him off and bade him get out of his sight.

"But remember this," he said, "I'll break you. I'll take the cheek out of you."

"Take the life out of me if you will," returned the boy, "make an end of me."

The face of Snapson seemed to swell with passion, and a hoarse kind of chuckle burst from his lips as he thrust a hand into the pocket containing his revolver.

Will stood quietly before him.

Dopper and Grip looked at each other, their eyes asking the question—

"Will he be driven to do it right off?"

But whatever Snapson may have felt, he was still master of himself, and withdrawing his hand he turned away.

"Dopper," he said, "take the cub in hand. Show him some of the work of the ship; but YOU needn't send him aloft."

"I suppose I may give him a bit of rope if he's dogged?" inquired Dopper.

"Why—no," replied Snapson, slowly, "I can do all that. I rather like it, and with this chap I should like to say that I broke him in alone. You leave all licking to me."

He spoke surlily as if he thought Dopper had tried to infringe upon his rights as captain of the ship, and in a high-shouldered lumbering way went across to the companion and disappeared below.

"Now, young 'un," said Dopper, "you heard what he said?"

"I did," replied Will.

"I don't know why he put the job on me," growled Dopper, in a dissatisfied way, "especially as I don't think you can do anything with a boy unless you are allowed to lick him."

"Are you a man?" asked Will, "and will you look on at the foul work that is going on without interfering?"

"We've nothing to do with that," replied Dopper.

"I was sent on board this ship to be murdered," continued Will, "I KNOW it as well as if I had been an ear witness to the arrangements made between my uncle and Captain Snapson. Will you not do something to protect me?"

"I am not such a fool as to interfere with the captain of a ship," replied Dopper.

"You, then, will be my friend?" said Will, turning with an appealing look to Grip.

A grin was the preliminary reply.

"You are a funky sort of cub, my lad," he said; "in course, if the cap'n set about murdering you and you call us to stop him, naterally enough we'll do it. Won't we, Dopper?"

"If we don't, who will?" returned Dopper, evasively.

Will looked from one to the other with anger and contempt in his eyes.

"You are a pair of curs," he said.

"Hallo!" cried Dopper, savagely, "you stow that, or I'll give you a thrashing."

"Curs—curs, I say," repeated Will emphatically, "and you lay a finger on me if you dare. You've got orders not to do it, you miserable dogs."

"Orders or no orders," said Dopper, with eyes that gleamed savagely, "I'll give you a twisting. Catch hold of him, Grip."

But Will stepped back and snatched up a belaying-pin that happened to be lying on the deck.

"Touch me if you dare," he said, "and I will half-kill you."

There was something almost ridiculous in this threat, coming from one so slight as Will, and addressed to a burly ruffian like Dopper, but for all that neither of the ruffians laughed.

The right spirit was in the movement, and the boy meant what he said.

His defence might be weak, but he looked as if he would fight while he could, and the bullies shirked an encounter with him.

They hung back, and an ordinary seaman, one of a group of five standing hard by, had the temerity to laugh.

Dopper singled him out, and went for him instantly.

The man put his hands up to guard himself, but Dopper was a bit of a pugilist, and he succeeded in striking the man full in the face.

The blow was a heavy one, and the man went down.

"You stow your grinning," said Dopper, "until you are in your hammock. Who are you to go a sniggering at your officers?"

"You are a pretty officer," replied the man. "I'm blowed if I'd have you as a figgerhead to a collier."

Dopper kicked him as he lay with great brutality, and there was a slight stir among the other men.

But they did nothing.

It was what they had seen before, and had at times to put up with themselves.

Will looked eagerly at them as if he expected they would do something to resist the brutality of Dopper, and he was evidently disappointed when he saw there was no movement on their part.

Perhaps he hoped for a mutiny, and thought it a possibility of his being saved from further persecution. We shall hear by-and-bye what were his real thoughts upon that point.

After the kicking the man got up and limped forward, and then set himself to work curling a lot of loose ropes that were lying about.

Will was astounded.

It was so unlike what he had read and heard of life at sea.

And yet it was real life.

The world had many such ships like the "Snake" afloat, and untold numbers of Doppers and Grips.

Bullying is rife everywhere, even on the large vessels, although it is not done quite so openly.

Not a man on board saw anything very outrageous in Dopper's brutality, and they dispersed to their labours as if nothing had happened.

With the scene ended Dopper's brief course of instruction to Will, which of course was no instruction at all.

He was not going to waste his time in teaching a boy who, according to his way of thinking, would never have any use for it.

So he left Will to himself, and the boy moved about the deck, talking first to one man and then to the other.

He told his story briefly to all, and asked them to befriend him, but not one promised to do so.

One said it "wasn't HIS business"; another only grunted out that he did not want to be bothered; a third told him plainly that he did not believe his yarn.

"All you boys who come to sea," he said, "pitch that sort of thing about. You take to heart that you ain't the only kid who has gone through the mill."

Another said he would not help him if he could, and added by way of a rider that "he had just as well be dead as living."

Sickened and weary Will turned away, and, throwing himself down under the lee of the ship's side to escape the rush of the wind, gave himself up to meditation.

CHAPTER IV.

A DARK DEED ON A DARK NIGHT—THE EAVESDROPPER AND WITNESS OF THE CRIME—MAKE THE BEST OF A BAD BARGAIN.

THE next day the wind lulled, and towards evening it became almost a calm.

With a heavy swaying motion the old "Snake" lumbered along about a knot an hour, accompanied by the execrating comments of the sailors on her make, shape, and sea-going qualities.

Snapson amused himself by drilling Will in going aloft.

He kept the boy at it until the sun went down, and then with a curse dismissed him from the deck.

"After dark," he said, "I shall give you another turn. So you had better rest a bit if you want to."

Will made no answer, but went below with a slow step.

The captain shortly afterwards followed him, and Dopper and Grip, on the watch, shortly after heard the sounds of oaths, blows, and gasping cries for mercy.

"He's in a hurry to get over the job," said Dopper.

"It will be done to-night," added Grip.

The sun set in a sea of fire, and the men said there would be a renewal of rough weather before morning with a gale from the south-west, which would be against them.

Snapson also anticipated rough weather, and, having ordered the storm sails to be set in readiness, brought a bottle of rum on deck and sat there smoking and drinking until it was dark.

"Priming himself for the job," said Dopper.

"We'll prime him when it's done," returned Grip, with a grin.

The sun disappeared, and the stars came out; with them arrived dark masses of clouds, that were whirled by the upper currents of wind across the sky.

These indications of coming storm were not to be neglected. The "Snake" was put about so as to get the wind astern, and among the men it was whispered that the captain "to escape the bottom of the sea was going to run towards home again."

Job Snapson did indeed intend running back to old England.

The "Snake," he knew, could make no headway against a great storm. A violent gust catching her on her beam-ends might, indeed, turn her over like an old turtle.

There were other reasons also for his going.

He hoped to reach there and play out the last act of the dark drama in which he was engaged.

Shortly after dark he left Dopper in charge of the deck and went below.

Grip, on the watch, immediately followed him stealthily.

The scoundrel crept up to the cabin door, and kneeling down he listened with all his ears.

The wind was now blowing hard, and the bur and boom of the rigging sounded like a vast collection of gigantic humming tops.

The sound at first prevented him from hearing anything.

But in a few moments he heard Snapson speaking sharply to Will, but what the boy said in reply was lost in the roaring that filled the ship.

Then Snapson's voice was heard again, angry and bitter, and a chair or table was overturned.

After that there was a shrill cry and then sounds of a struggle. A heavy body was banged against the cabin door. Then all was still.

Grip was a great, great bully, and, therefore, in heart a coward.

He sprang up livid and trembling and groped his way back to the deck.

It was very dark now, so dark that it was difficult to see a third way across the vessel's deck.

The wind rising high carried the "Snake" along as fast as she could be made to go, and the watch—save Dopper, who was at the wheel—were lying forward under the lee of a pile of canvas and ropes at the foot of the foremast

Grip crept to the wheel, and took Dopper by the arm.

"*He's done it!*"

These were the words he whispered in his ear, and, owing to his strained eager attention, Dopper heard him.

"Stand by, don't move!" he said, "and we may see something."

Presently they saw, like some dim shadow in a mist, the form of Job Snapson rise slowly up to the deck.

He had something big and heavy on his back, and they judged, by his slowly moving to and fro, that he was looking around to see if he were observed.

Apparently he could not see the two men at the wheel.

A few minutes later they saw him creeping with his burden to the vessel's side.

Grip, after a meaning clasp of his friend's arm, got near enough to see Snapson heave something big and heavy over the ship's side into the sea.

With a heart that beat like the trot of a horse on a sandy road he stole back to his companion, and by motions indicated what he had seen.

A few minutes afterwards Snapson came up to them and asked, in a loud voice, where he could get a dark lantern.

"There's one in your cabin," replied Dopper in the same tone.

"Go and get it," roared Snapson. "Let Grip take the wheel."

But Dopper held back.

Somehow he did not want, after what he had heard, to descend to that cabin, and Snapson yelled out—

"Come down and show me where it is, confound you!"

Grip took the wheel, and the other two men went down together.

There was a light in the cabin dimly burning, and the whole place was in confusion.

Strange to say, one of the first things they saw was the dark lantern required.

Snapson had closed the door as soon as they came in, and the men could hear each other plainly and easily.

"Dopper," said Snapson, "I think something has happened!"

"Do you?" said Dopper, curtly.

"Yes! I sent that little devil, Fearon, up to the lower cross-trees just now, and he hasn't come back."

"Did you?" returned Dopper. "What was that for?"

"To train him to his work."

"Wasn't that rather rough on him?"

"Well! perhaps it was. But I did it for the best. I wish you could take this light and see if anything's happened to him."

"Look here, cap'n, I can see all about that," said Dopper, with a hideous grin, "without a light."

"What do you mean?" demanded Snapson, with a frown and a bitter oath.

"I mean this," said Dopper, banging his hand upon the table, "that me and Grip know what's been done; and we know the boy ain't fallen overboard, although you are going to try and make some people believe it."

"What do you mean?" demanded Snapson.

"I mean," replied Dopper, "don't pull out your shooter, cap'n, for I've one here"—he produced it as he spoke—"and I'll use it too. I mean that you have murdered the boy, and we saw you pitch him overboard."

"It's a lie!"

"We did, and whatever is the price of the job we mean to stand in it."

A look of relief passed over Job Snapson's face.

"If that's all," he said, "you shall have your share. A hundred pounds apiece, if nobody else knows of it. Say, will that do?"

"We ought to have half between us."

"It is half, or nearly so. Say, will it do, or will you compel me to swear that *you* killed the lad and pitched him overboard?"

Dopper changed colour.

He saw that he was not going to have everything his own way, and a hundred pounds cash was better than nothing with the chances of a trial for murder.

"It's done, cap'n," he said. "Mum's the word. But don't try to shirk the pay, or I'll peach on you, and risk what may follow."

CHAPTER V.

IN THE COUNTING-HOUSE OF WARRINGTON AND CO.—A PARAGRAPH IN AN EVENING PAPER—OFF TO PORTLAND—THE SETTLEMENT OF THE CONTRACT.

IN a dingy counting-house in the heart of the City sat the old man Warrington, with an open ledger before him.

No longer clad in agricultural attire, but clothed in black with a white tie round his neck, he was altogether a different person from the man who sat with Job Snapson in the old inn in Wapping.

He now looked the very *beau ideal* of snug respectability, a model merchant engaged in business.

But business for the day was over.

The lights of the place, save one burning on his desk, were out, the clerks were gone, and all but one man waiting to close up the place had gone.

The contents of that ledger did not please the merchant.

"Unless I can raise ten thousand pounds," he said with a groan, "we must stop payment in a week's time."

He put this book in a safe behind him, closed the door, locked, and touched a bell.

The man waiting to close the place gladly responded.

"Help me on with my coat, Stevenson," he said.

This office was performed for him, and with a slow step he left the place.

Outside it was a dull, drizzly autumn evening, and people were hurrying home or going in search of some place to spend an hour or two to shake off the weariness of the day's work.

A naked-footed urchin came tearing by.

"Evening paper," he yelled, "evening paper—Star, E-cho—Eve-ning News."

"Here, give me a paper, boy," said the old merchant

He put it in his pocket, and sauntered on to the London Tavern, which he entered, and marched into the dining-room.

Having ordered dinner and a pint of wine, he sat down and took out his paper.

Opening it, the following short paragraph caught his eyes:

"The brig 'Snake,' which sailed a week or so ago for the Mauritius, has been obliged to return much damaged by the hard gales. She put into Portland to-day. Loss, one boy, an apprentice, who fell overboard."

The old man did not leap up, and cry "Saved," although he would have done so, for that paragraph meant worldly salvation to him.

Now that Will had gone, and he knew the "Snake" had no other apprentice on board, he was as good as master of forty thousand pounds.

This was the sum left to Will by his father.

A consultation with the railway time-table showed the merchant that he could catch the night mail train easily after dinner, and he decided to run down to Portland.

He was too eager to have that good news confirmed to wait for Snapson to come to him.

He hastily partook of dinner, drank his wine, and in due time was on his way.

Arriving at Portland, he found an hotel where there was a night porter, and from him he learnt that the paragraph was correct.

And, what was more, the captain of the 'Snake' had come on shore and had put up at an inn in the adjoining street.

Having written a note to Snapson and given instructions for it to be delivered at an early hour, the old merchant went to bed.

Strange to say he soon slept. He was troubled with very little conscience

When he awoke three men were in his room, and he recognised Snapson seated by his side. The others he did not know.

They were Dopper and Grip, who had made up their minds not to leave Snapson until they got their share of the money.

"Who are these men?" asked Warrington, "why do you bring your blackguard acquaintances here?"

"I didn't bring 'em," said Snapson curtly, "they came."

"The fact is," said Dopper, advancing, "we know all about the little game

that's been going on, and we want our share of the money. Pay him, so that he can pay us, and then you won't be troubled with us any more."

"Before you do that," Snapson said, "wait for two other people I'm expecting every minute. I think I hear them on the stairs."

The old merchant glanced from one to the other, not knowing what to make of the scene, but ere an explanation could be offered the door opened, and a quiet official-looking man entered.

He went straight to the bedside and laid his hand on the old merchant's arm.

"I arrest you," he said, "for inciting Captain Snapson to commit murder."

"Snapson!" cried the alarmed old man, "what new folly is this?"

"Nothing new," replied Snapson with a smile, "I never meant to kill the boy, and I've not done it, but I thought I would pretend to, and bring an old villain like you to justice. I also wanted to disappoint them two sharks, who I knew were watching me for their own ends, and so I got up the whole thing. I pretended to bully the boy, and he and I laid out the whole job. Lor'! how I laughed in my sleeve when he pretended to be afraid to go aloft, when he's got a heart inside him that would take him anywhere. Oh! we played the game beautifully, and I kept him close in my cabin on the way home, so that neither of these fools bowled me out. Ha! ha! here's the t'other party I expected."

Then there came bounding up the stairs a bright-faced happy boy, clad in a decent suit of clothes, and when he entered the room he ran straight into Snapson's arms, who clasped him and held him tight.

"Because I owed you a little money," said Snapson to the dismayed old man, "you thought you had a hold on me, and that I, being poor, would be tempted to take your money; but, ugly as I am, and the Lord knows I've got a phiz that would frighten a rocking-horse, I'm not a murderer in my HEART or HEAD. So there you are, old man, just as you've run yourself ashore, and you've nothing to blame but your own wickedness."

The merchant raised himself slowly up and strove to speak, but the words he would have uttered did not come readily.

At last he said, slowly—

"It is all a lie, I have nothing to do with this matter."

"That will be a question for the judge and jury," said the officer, suavely. "Don't you think you had better get up and dress yourself?"

"By-and-bye, let me rest awhile," was the weary reply. "I am an old man and you need not be hard upon me."

"There is no great hurry," replied Snapson, "but I feel it my duty to see you off."

"Have mercy on me!" the merchant moaned.

"It is all well to prate of mercy, now," said Snapson, "it would have been better if you had practised it long ago."

He had removed his hand from Will's shoulder, and he now replaced it with a tender action very much at variance with his hard-featured face.

"If you had been a man with half a heart in you, Mr. Warrington," he said. "you could never have even *thought* of dooming a young lad like this

to die. Your life is drawing to an end—his has little more than begun. One grain of good nature in you would have stopped the idea of such a crime."

"He comes of a proud braggart race," said the merchant, smiting the bed with sudden ferocity. "His father despised me as a trader. He never said so, but I knew it——"

"I have heard my mother say that you erred in thinking so," interposed Will. "My father, though of good family, had no pride. He held aloof from you because you sneered at him when he was poor. When he unexpectedly became rich you would have made friends with him. But he refused then, and he was right."

"A cub of the old race," muttered the merchant, fixing his eyes fiercely on him, "take him from my sight. The game is up. I have played for a stake and lost—that's all."

"How like an innocent man you talk!" said Snapson.

"Give a rogue rope enough, and he will hang himself," muttered the officer.

"It is time we left him," said Snapson. "I have nothing more to say to the old villain—nor anything to anybody else here, but I think a little action is required."

Then he let Will go, turned to Dopper, whom he took by the collar and led to the door. There he kicked him halfway down the stairs, and Grip, anxious to escape the like fate, dashed away at such a pace that he tripped over his friend, and the pair went down together.

* * * * * * * * *

Mr. Warrington was tried and convicted, and, owing to his age, was let off with two years' imprisonment. But that was enough for him—he died in prison.

Will's affairs were taken in hand by a respectable lawyer, and he was put to a comfortable school, where the neglect he had suffered from was speedily counteracted.

In due time he came in to his fortune, and among the first to get the benefit of his generosity was Snapson, the hard-faced but kind-hearted old seaman, on whom he settled a modest income for life.

The old man, he was getting old then, came down to a place Will had bought in the county of Warwickshire from the last of an old family, who had squandered the remnant of his fortune on the turf.

It was one of those grand old houses that we find dotted about the country, beautiful in themselves and ripened by the hand of time into a thing of beauty and a joy to every beholder.

Will had become a handsome man. There was nothing of the delicate boy about him as he came out to welcome the rough old man to whom he, in one sense, owed his life and position.

"Welcome," he said, holding out both his hands.

Snapson took them, looking at him with curious tender pride.

They had not met for three years, and Will had changed much in the meantime,

"I don't see now the lad I knew on board the 'Snake,'" said the old seaman.

"No," replied Will, "the 'Snake' is a thing of the past. Sometimes I think it must have been an ugly dream."

"It was real enough," said Snapson; "but this seems to me to be MY dream."

Will smiled, and led him into a handsome room that was like a fairy palace to Snapson. He had never sat at such a table, or eaten off such plates, or partaken of such food before.

After luncheon Will had a horse and trap brought round, and he drove Snapson to a nice little cottage on the borders of a big pond, almost a lake, and close by there was a trim little sailing boat, moored to the bank.

In front of the cottage was a flagstaff, with a line for running up a flag, and on the summit of it floated the Union Jack.

"What do you think of this?" Will asked.

"Why, I think it is as neat and trim a little place as a man could wish to see," Snapson replied.

"It is not quite the sea," Will said, "but it is the nearest thing we can do to it about here."

"You've got a kind of hankering after salt water," said Snapson.

"Not a bit of it," said Will, laughing, "but I thought you might."

"Me!" exclaimed Snapson.

"Yes, you," returned Will; "for this little house is for you, and when you are lonely come up and see me. I shall come and see you, and you will easily make friends here. Perhaps it will be too dull for you?"

"Dull, my lad," said Snapson, with tears of joy in his eyes, "why this is like what I've been hankering after all my life."

He could say no more, but he held out his hand, and Will cordially grasped it.

Both were well anchored at last.

THE END.

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